

TESTIMONY

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BEFORE

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Field Hearings

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Subject: National Animal Identification System

Mr. Chairman, my name is Charles Beckendorf. I am a fourth generation dairy farmer from Tomball, Texas, where I operate a 250 cow dairy on a 350-acre intensive grazing operation. I serve as Chairman of the Board of the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) and on the Corporate Board of Directors of Dairy Farmers of America. I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony here today on the important subject of Animal Identification.

NMPF, headquartered in Arlington, VA, develops and carries out policies that advance the well-being of U.S. dairy producers and the cooperatives they collectively own. The members of NMPF's 32 cooperatives produce the majority of the U.S. milk supply, making NMPF the voice of 60,000 dairy producers on Capitol Hill and with government agencies. As members of NMPF, we join together to better assure that our government in Washington, DC will understand and recognize those economic, legislative, and regulatory issues that most impact our livelihoods and communities back home.

The need for a uniform national animal identification program in the U.S. is urgent. As the recent discovery of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in Washington clearly illustrates, it is absolutely critical to be able to rapidly track and verify all animal movements associated with all birth cohorts of an infected BSE animal, including their offspring. I am sure we have not seen or felt all the ramifications of this one cow that "stole Christmas"! One thing we can now say for certain, BSE is no longer just a foreign animal disease to the U.S. Another

thing we can say for certain is that we do not have a workable uniform national animal identification and tracking plan in place in the U.S. to address any future disease outbreaks. Until we do, as producers, we must constantly live in the fear of a potential outbreak of a foreign animal disease or emerging animal disease in the U.S. that could devastate our herds, our markets, and our national security.

In the case of a Foot-and-Mouth Disease outbreak, it is even more critical to be able to quickly track, both forward and backward, all animal movements associated with all potential sources of infection. This is imperative regardless of whether the disease was introduced naturally or intentionally.

The U.S. needs a uniform system that establishes minimum standards for identifying all physical locations or premises where individual animals and groups of animals are routinely raised, and animal lots are located. In addition, the U.S. needs uniform minimum standards for the identification of individual animals, groups of animals, or animal lots. Lastly, a uniform, nationally-organized system for reporting and storing the specific information required for tracking animal movements between premises is necessary. Without these, it becomes impossible to quickly respond to an animal health emergency and avert many potential negative public and marketplace consequences.

NMPF recognizes the advantages of implementing a uniform national animal identification system as envisioned under the U.S. Animal Identification

Plan. This plan has become widely recognized within the livestock industry under the acronym of “USAIP.” For the past two years, more than 70 national livestock organizations, and approximately 400 producers and experts representing these organizations, have labored to develop USAIP as a national “umbrella” operating plan. Under this plan, all species of food animals - from cattle to fish - can be properly identified and tracked for both disease surveillance and emergency management purposes.

A number of different species working groups are being organized under USAIP to develop final implementation plans for introduction of USAIP into their respective industries. The Dairy Species Working Group is now in the process of finalizing details for implementation of USAIP in the U.S. dairy industry. Dairy and beef cattle interests will soon come together to formulate overall cattle industry recommendations for implementation of USAIP within the entire cattle industry sector. Likewise, both the pork and small ruminant industries, such as sheep and goats, are working to establish final recommendations for implementation of USAIP in their respective industries.

A significant concern of dairy producers is the imperative to maintain confidentiality of the animal identification and tracking information that would need to be stored in a central database under USAIP. This information may be limited to premises identification numbers, individual animal numbers, group numbers, animal lot identification numbers, and dates and locations of movement

events. It is important that this information is maintained as confidential business information. When such information is combined into one central data base, it could be misused by those who have motivation to do harm to livestock producers. NMPF recommends that every effort be made to restrict public access to any data gathered. Limited access can be provided to only those state or federal government officials who need to conduct animal disease surveillance or to track animal movements in the event of an animal health emergency.

With a broad base of producer and livestock marketing support, USAIP has been developed as a model national animal identification and tracking plan driven by industry needs and expectations that we believe are both realistic and achievable. An effort is being made to keep USAIP technology neutral, so each species may select and adopt the technology which works best in their respective industries. A timeframe has been established under USAIP to begin to track the movement of cattle, swine, and sheep in both intrastate and interstate commerce. NMPF believes that this should be initiated as soon as possible, but recognizes that the process of achieving a successful animal identification program covering all species will be complex and lengthy.

To allow the process to get started, the USAIP operational model should now be implemented without further delay. Congress can help facilitate this implementation process by recognizing USAIP as the system of animal identification and tracking, providing the necessary financial support, and

providing for confidentiality of information that will be necessary to assure producer acceptance of any national animal identification plan. This implementation effort must also become a cooperative effort between industry and government at all levels if the public is to be protected.

Animal agriculture at the farm level is a \$100 Billion dollar industry. Preventing the introduction of foreign animal diseases that could greatly disrupt our national economy is of paramount importance to overall public confidence in our food supply. Therefore, the public must share a substantial portion of the upfront costs associated with the introduction of a workable and sustainable national animal identification and tracking plan. USAIP, if properly implemented, can become the foundation for monitoring and surveillance for many zoonotic diseases. A national laboratory surveillance system cannot be effective until a workable and uniform national animal identification plan is implemented. Foreign consumers won't embrace our products until they have confidence that a uniform national U.S. animal identification plan is implemented and demonstrated to work. This is a major but essential undertaking for the national benefit. Congress can assist by addressing the substantial costs that become associated with building an infrastructure necessary to identify and track all livestock movements in the U.S. on a sustainable basis. It is important to remember that producers must supply the labor and time essential to make any national animal identification system work. It is equally important for the infrastructure associated

with getting any new national program implemented to be in place as soon as possible.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to present this testimony today in front of your distinguished Committee on behalf of NMPF and many dairy producers across the U.S. We appreciate you taking the time to come to the great State of Texas to conduct these important hearings on a most important issue. We appreciate all you have done on behalf of animal agriculture and the U.S. dairy industry, and we look forward to working closely with you to begin the prompt implementation of a workable and producer friendly national animal identification system as envisioned under USAIP.

I would be happy to address any questions you may have. Thank you.